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ABSTRACT

Undergraduates majoring in communication often earn their degrees without a clear sense of the intellectual skills they have developed after four years. However, there are skills that every communication major should have acquired by the time he or she graduates. Each should have learned how to design and present messages in a variety of settings ranging from face-to-face to the public podium. Each should have learned basic concepts of communication theory and rhetorical theory that will permit him or her to make a basic analysis of communication transactions in a variety of settings. Finally, their studies should have prepared them to think critically and creatively about messages, so that they can make intelligent suggestions for message-design strategies that address the problems or rhetorical situations they encounter in their careers, in their lives as citizens, and as private individuals. Further, some of the individual traits that will allow today's students to meet the rapid developments in the field of communication would include the following elements. First, students must be equipped with "change-thinking." This means they must be prepared to think about change and to think within a context of change. Second, students must be capable of "global thinking"--they must be aware of international interests. Finally, they must be equipped with "moral thinking"--they must be concerned about individual people's lives. (TB)

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Gearing-up for Change: Reflections on Caring Choice in a Perilous World

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As we cruise toward the twenty-first century it is not without reason that the expanding and rapidly changing information superhighway has become the dominant image for our route. The conditions associated with post modernity--loss of tradition, unstable meanings, rapid change, an epistemology of function, and more--are accentuated by contemporary conditions of communication. Conditions of space and time have always guided theory and become ingrained in practices of communication that were sensitive to their environment. These conditions have been reordered and redefined by the accelerated speed and expanding extent of human interaction. History teaches that dynamic and radical impact follows revolutions in communication technology--the invention of the alphabet, printing press, radio, telegraph, newswire, and telephone come quickly to mind. In each case social knowledge and organization were wrenched from familiar structures of acquisition and transmission that conditioned prior human relationships. McLuhan summarized this connection with a flashy aphorism, the medium is the message, that contains enormous importance for our era. We are already past the frontier of another communication revolution fueled by technological innovation. However, the rapidity of our acceleration toward change makes it difficult to recognize where the borders between past and future now lie, which

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compounds the problem of orienting to the profound implications of our communication revolution for economic, political, social, and cultural conditions that will define life in advanced societies during the next century.

Were I blessed with prescience, I would perform the truly bold feat of discussing communication in the twenty-first century with the year 2195 as my benchmark. But given the utter speed and radical nature of the changes we are going to experience, envisioning five years in the future is enough to send one reeling. That I am composing these thoughts on a notebook PC, switching back and forth between two files that contain alternative rhetorical strategies to get me where I wish to arrive, is an activity that was beyond my imagination even last year, although it certainly has been routine for my students for quite some time. That I can take this notebook with me wherever I travel, can link to telephone lines that connect me with students and colleagues anywhere in the world, and can even transfer these remarks instantaneously to them with a keystroke exceed what I might have forecasted ten years ago when I first began using a PC, much less twenty-five years ago when I first read McLuhan. So I will settle for a more attainable goal, speaking of communication study in the twenty-first century in terms of some constants that will be especially important in a context of rapid change.

I speak from the dual position of being chairman of a Ph.D. granting communication department at a major public research university and as a rhetorician who has been teaching and writing about his subject for more than a quarter-century. That last item qualifies me as an old buffalo, I guess, though it does not guarantee much beyond projections of professional trends from past experience, and our topic is not the profession but the *study* of a subject.

However, they do provide me with a point of view that accentuates certain features over others.

From its origins in Greek antiquity, our tradition for the study of communication has linked it to the practical business of doing the world's work. In antiquity, the venues for such work involved duties of citizenship--serving in the assembly, serving on juries, paying homage to civic heroes. These responsibilities were executed through skillful public speaking and informed judging. Our lineage traces itself to the schools of the Greek Sophists and Roman rhetoricians who taught the arts of public speaking in order to prepare their students for participation in public life. The study of communication was described under the heads of *rhetorica docens* and *rhetorica utens*, or rhetoric as taught and rhetoric as practiced. The former referred to the theory and the latter the performance of public speaking. In both cases the attention of rhetorical inquiry was directed toward the resources of language and thought that could be marshaled to effect in the conduct of affairs, the most convenient summary of which is found in the five canons of ancient rhetoric.

Today the concerns of communication are less confined to the official fora of public affairs than was the case for our predecessors of as recently as a generation ago. We are still, nonetheless, a discipline concerned with studying how the world organizes and moves forward to accomplish its work and with preparing our students to participate meaningfully in that process. We are a discipline whose center is the ongoing activity of creating society through the management of symbols, or the study of messages with attention to their antecedents and consequences. We remain a practical discipline whose central concerns always come back to the practical possibilities of language.

These are not incidental concerns for a department chair. It used to be that when we would interview a candidate for the chair's position, we would ask where s/he thought the discipline was headed. The past quarter-century has taught us is that this question--a vital one for an academic discipline to ask--may be secondary to where the society and the international community are headed. During this period we have witnessed monumental changes in politics nationally and internationally, including the unprecedented events of 1989; in economics, including the altered status of the United States from a lender to a debtor nation; in society, including the transformation of the workplace and the urban community from mostly male or mostly white dominated to more equitably gendered, multicolored, and multicultural environments in which the white male is soon to become a minority member; and in technology, including the communication revolution that has made it possible via PC and modem for everyone to access instantaneously everyone else and the information they choose to share. These conditions are not necessarily the outcomes of communicative practices, though the role of communication plays a significant part in each of these areas, sometimes as the loci of their problems and also as the potential source of their resolutions. Their importance to our nation is that they mark conditions it must prepare its citizens to meet if we are to remain politically stable, economically competitive, and socially cohesive. Consequently, they set an agenda for higher education in which our discipline must participate meaningfully if we are not to become ancillary to the role of American higher education in shaping the nation's future and that of the world. Put another way, communication locates its academic significance in its ability to address the practical considerations that are part of and follow from the study of messages and their antecedents

and consequences. Our relevance is contingent on the degree to which our theoretical, critical, and applied work in pursuit of our disciplinary core addresses the defining conditions of the human world.[2] I believe our successes on this count will depend largely on how we address conditions of change--in our research, in our preparation of graduate students as researchers and educators, and in our undergraduate curriculum. In the space remaining, I wish to consider this challenge in terms of the undergraduate curriculum, because its problems and possibilities mirror what we must confront in the other areas.

Undergraduates majoring in communication, and in the liberal arts generally, often earn their degrees without a clear sense of the intellectual skills they have developed as a result of four years spent in a particular type of intellectual culture. As a department chair and as a professor, there are certain tools that I hope every one of our majors has acquired as a result of earning a BA in communication. Each should have learned how to design and

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[2] The argument of place on higher education's agenda is made only with respect to public institutions of higher learning, although many of the same pressures and questions apply to private institutions as well. The expanding costs of higher education, coupled with growing public insistence on accountability for public expenditures, have made liberal education particularly vulnerable to economic scrutiny since it does not provide professional programs preparing undergraduates for specific careers. For taxpayers, not to mention those who are paying tuition and assuming indebtedness of at least $50,000 for an undergraduate education at a public university, there is an understandable concern for vocational preparation being enhanced as a result of earning a bachelor's degree. Economic constraints on public universities are not new. Depending on a state's economy, these constraints were intermittently important during the 1980s, and have been a general concern across states in the 1990s. All predictions are for economic restraint to remain a defining condition for public higher education, which means that the public dialogue on higher education will continue to ask liberal studies to identify their contribution to essential social needs. Without getting into the politics of higher education, and whether we will enter the twenty-first century with a nineteenth-century model of disciplinarity and its relationship to social needs, it appears as if institutions of higher learning will continue to face the problem of making choices on which disciplines to support and which to reduce to service status or eliminate from departmental status. These decisions will almost certainly require assessment of two factors: relationship to learning within the university based on cross-disciplinary interdependencies and contribution of the discipline to social concerns broadly defined. In this paper I have not attempted to construct the argument for the importance of the disciplinary place of communication within the academy. Obviously, communication would continue to be studied, albeit with considerably less intelligence, should departments of communication be eliminated. I have assumed, for the purposes of this paper, continued departmental existence and focused instead on the activities we must include as part of our academic agenda.

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present messages in a variety of settings ranging from face-to-face to the public podium. Each should have learned basic concepts of communication theory and rhetorical theory that will permit her or him to make a basic analysis of communication transactions in a variety of settings. This does not mean they will have achieved the skill, much less the wisdom, to qualify as communication consultants to heads-of-state. They may not be expert detectors of deception, sublimation, transference, identification, ideological distortion, dissociation, or the like. However, their undergraduate studies should have exposed them to these ideas as conceptual tools to the extent that they can detect their features when they are dominant in a message. Finally, their studies should have prepared them to think critically and creatively about messages, so that they can make intelligent suggestions for message-design strategies that address the problems or rhetorical situations they encounter in their careers, in their lives as citizens, and as private individuals.

These skills are not so very different from those our ancient ancestors would have aspired to develop in students who were under their care in the schools of rhetoric. The next century will differ from our ancestral heritage in how we think about the conditions of communication in which these skills are practiced. I started this paper with reference to the problems and opportunities posed by postmodernity. The specific social issues and developments that will arise from, say cyberspace, virtual space, expanding surveillance records, or the growing distance between public knowledge and the technical knowledge of epistemic elites would require a crystal ball. Nonetheless, some of the specific intellectual traits we will require to meet these unknowns can be advanced in general terms. I wish to advance three that I think will be of central importance.

First, we will have to equip our students for "change-thinking." This means they must be prepared to think about change and to think within a context of change. Doubtless change-thinking will require developing elaboration and systematic application of the *topoi* of change. It also will require an ability to think about a present context historically. This will be especially difficult to accomplish in an age that has forgotten to think historically. No one can predict the future, as the events of 1989 made evident to area experts in foreign policy analysis, as well as to lay observers of the international stage. Looking at the same scene, Vaclav Havel wrote:

> [T]hose malleable, humiliated, cynical citizens of Czechoslovakia, who seemingly believed in nothing, found the tremendous strength to cast off the totalitarian system within a few weeks in an entirely peaceful and dignified manner. Humanistic and democratic traditions slept on, after all, somewhere in the unconscious of our nation.[3]

His observation reminds us that future likelihoods and their implications are difficult to gauge without an awareness of the past, since we learn of political or economic expectations from a history of cultural commitments, patterns of social organization, structural/functional biases , and the like that come into play in a context of change, especially rapid and sweeping change.

"Change-thinking," furthermore, will require thinking anthropologically about communication. It will require that we understand meanings as the products of their contexts of use.[4] Anthropologists have made the point that meanings are narratival enactments. To

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[3] Qtd. In W. Robert Connor, "The Importance of the Humanities as the World Order Changes," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 1990, A44.

[4] We see in some of our current undergraduates an awareness related to this mode of "change-thinking" when they express their awareness that it is unlikely their work lives will be spent working for one organization or in

make sense of local responses of difference, humans refer to larger understandings in which the local instances are embedded. In the postmodern environment, meanings are likely to be unstable, as changing conditions call them into question. Our temptation will be to say that in this context narrativity is dead. Certainly narratives based on tradition are seriously weakened, if not dead. However, that does not preclude the possibility of shared values. Nor does it preclude discovering alternative interpretive frameworks for making events coherent. Narratives tell the "story" of events in terms of relationships of power/knowledge that work for certain interests and against others.

A good example of the tenacity of narrativity is the change in language adopted by Polish dissidents after the overthrow of communism. Before that occurred the fight for civil society was couched in terms of "nation," as opposed to "state." After the communists fell, "nation" quickly ceased to be a central term, and was replaced by "society." With this new term came profound implications for the role of the Catholic Church, which had historically been custodian of the symbols indigenous to the Polish nation. Now that national identity was no longer threatened by an alien state, the discourse of change significantly diminished the potency and role of religious affiliation in secular affairs. The Catholic Church, in effect, lost a great deal of its power to chart the course of Polish civil society because it no longer controlled the narratives that capture native aspirations.

A second intellectual trait we will need to inculcate in our students is "global-thinking." The fact is that technology increasingly connects local acts to the larger web of international interests and concerns. Another of McLuhan's flashy phrases, the global

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one locale. My colleague Phillip Tompkins has suggested "uncertainty-thinking" of this sort as a corollary to "change thinking".

village, has descriptive value with profound implications for the next century. To think about and deal with modern global issues will require combining technical knowledge and problem-solving techniques from many fields. Perhaps the most obvious area where combinations of this sort will occur is in the virtual organization made possible by the elimination of distance via the information superhighway.

Announcing the importance of technology for the study of communication in the next century is hardly news. It is, in fact, to state the obvious. But therein lies the rub. No one doubts the importance of the technological, and by extension the scientific investigation of its consequences. But there is serious question whether we will become oblivious to the importance of *humanistic* study in preparing to meet our "global-thinking" challenge. Thinking globally requires thinking in terms of the world, not just the world that is but the world we might inhabit. For example, the prominence of calls for *civil society* in Central European dissident discourse is an indication that ideology and significant symbols remain imbedded and powerful forces that steer social will and social action. Our students surely will require preparation to understand how technological innovation alters the character of communicative relationships and creates problems and opportunities for message design. Unless we are to abandon them to intellectual drift in a sea of change they also will require skill at assessing the pragmatic consequences of selected message choices in terms that exceed attaining goals. They also must learn how to detect the dialectic between cultures and value systems, and to critique the consequences for the quality of human relationships that accompany rapid global changes.

Another aspect of global-thinking is global-communicating. When I was in high school, I "learned" that the average American is apathetic to events in the world. Nothing much has changed in the intervening 35 years. Perhaps it is true, or perhaps the average American simply does not know how to consider and address public, much less global issues. Here education plays a role. If we wish to prepare our students to think globally, we must prepare them to address the world. They need to see their studies in relationship to the world our scholarship attempts to describe, alter and critique. Involvement in experiential learning, where students are asked to use concepts outside the classroom to account for actual discourses and their antecedents and consequences, is critical for them to internalize ideas and to see them in relationship to praxis. Such involvements might include undergraduate research opportunities, out-of- and in-class assignments, and internships that ask students to diagnose, assess, critique, and construct messages with an eye toward the meanings competing social actors attempt to give to the world that is and the meaningful world our students may envision in its place.

The humanistic dimension to global thinking suggests a third intellectual trait we must attend to in the future study of communication, "moral-thinking." Under conditions of rapid change, the consequences for non-compliance to the directives it fosters can be brutal. As market conditions change, for example, institutional players either respond or are dealt out of the game. The closing of unprofitable plants in company towns that literally destroy the fabric of community built around the work site is a too familiar case in point. Under the threat of "change or be crushed," there is great temptation to engage in functional thinking. That encourages granting a privileged voice to epistemic elites who are masters of means-

ends analysis. Means-ends analysis, or what is commonly referred to as instrumental reasoning, ignores considerations that subordinate function to moral value. Jean-François Lyotard[5] has drawn the distinction between narrative and technical reasoning as the contrast of epistemologies at issue in postmodernity. Regardless of whether one accepts the full scope of Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern condition, his point of epistemic contrast alerts us to the differences between thinking about the world in terms of propositions and thinking in terms of stories. The former places great emphasis on logical relationships that are abstract and context-independent. It aims at establishing formal, theoretical interpretation as a paradigm for understanding. The latter orders the world in terms of human relationships that are concrete and situation-specific. It attempts to describe reality in terms that have verisimilitude as the paradigm for understanding.

Lyotard's analysis argues that propositional thinking has ascended to dominance in the postmodern era. His thesis is captured most succinctly by his claim for the hegemony of "informatics," such that all knowledge must be expressible in the digitized terms of computer logic or it loses epistemic relevance. The problem Lyotard has diagnosed goes directly to the moral development of our students. These distinct ways of ordering experience cannot be reduced to one another. Both are important human capabilities and achievements. To advance *logicoscientific* reasoning at the expense of narrative thought attenuates the avenue to developing context sensitivity. Narratives establish moral justification through the interplay of thought, character, and action in terms of human experience.

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[5] Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

Writing on the psychology of moral education, Paul Vitz reminds us that personal conduct in a particular situation does not depend on moral rules but on what a person cares about.[6] To equip our students to think both about what matters to them and to others in society, the study of communication in the next century must include attention to texts of lived experience and of stories in which interpersonal conflict, public deliberation, and strategic action provide opportunities to observe, discuss, and formulate their sense of right and wrong as more important than victory at all costs.

The study of communication in the twenty-first century will require scholars of enormous talent with broad and deep vision. Doubtless it will be an era when the power of digitized information will permit us to make unprecedented advances in the human sciences. Rapid change will require instant adaptation. Doing so intelligently will be advanced to the degree that we are able to discover and impart the role of communication in precipitating and altering change. Doubtless it also will be an era in which the sheer rapidity of change will outstrip empirical knowledge based on contingencies. The three areas of study I have addressed--change-thinking, global-thinking, and moral-thinking--are not intended as a complete inventory of concerns we will face in the next century. Given the dialectic between permanence and change, they are, however, concerns of importance we will have to address in our classrooms and, by implication, in our research, if our work is to bear on the lived realities of our students and society, and if we wish our work to serve the larger end of contributing to a world of amity and hope.

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[6] Paul C. Vitz, "The Use of Stories in Moral Education," American Psychologist 45: 1990, 713.